

Eastern Fables & Folk Tales

The Last Exile of Sítá

BY
J. C. NESFIELD
M.A.

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THE LAST EXILE OF SÍTÁ.

I. SÍTÁ'S DESIRE TO REVISIT VALMÍKI'S HERMITAGE.

1. Having slain his great enemy Rávan, the demon-king of Lanká, and returned with his wife Sítá to Ayódhyá, the royal seat of his ancestors, Rám gave all his thoughts to the affairs of his kingdom. "A king's first duty," he said one day to a minister while Sítá was present, "is to his people. To satisfy my subjects I am ready, if need be, to sacrifice my own happiness. I should even feel bound to sacrifice Sítá, the loved of my soul, if her presence brought me into disgrace or hindered me in the discharge of my public duties. My subjects look to me for safety and guidance. They are the first persons to be thought of."

2. The high-minded Sítá, instead of feeling hurt, was pleased when she heard these words; and said, "How could my lord the king, if he did not think of his people first, sustain the burden of the royal office in a manner befitting the great house of Raghu?" Every day at the regular hour Rám took his seat in the Council-hall, and received from his ministers reports on any matter for which the king's orders were specially needed.

3. As time went on, it was expected that Sítá would shortly become a mother, and great hopes were expressed by every one that a son would be born. It so happened that at this time the queen-dowager, Kausalyá by name, the mother of Rám, had been called away together with Rám's brothers, named Bharat and Shatrughna, to attend a great sacrifice to be celebrated by a relative named Rishya-Sringa, who lived at some distance from Ayódhyá. Rám and Sítá were both invited with the rest to be present ; but as Sítá did not wish to go, Rám remained behind to take care of her, and Lakshman, the third brother of Rám, remained with them. To Rám and Sítá this brother had been a faithful attendant and constant companion in all their wanderings and in all changes of fortune.

4. Under the guidance of Lakshman, a large painting had been made by the most skilful artist in Ayódhyá, depicting the various scenes through which the three had passed in their wanderings from Ayódhyá to Lanká. All three examined the contents of the picture together and had a long talk over the different parts. When they had finished, Sítá turned to Rám and said : " After seeing this picture, a great desire has seized me to visit once more the peaceful retreats in which we took refuge or rest while wandering through the forest, and to see again the wives of the sages and hermits who showed us so much kindness. Can you allow me to go for a short visit to the forest-retreat of the venerable sage, Válímiki ? "

5. " I am ready," said Rám, " to do anything which will give you pleasure or add to your happiness. But the

visit, as you say, must be a short one. The sage, when we first met him many years ago, had his retreat near the hill of Chitra-kút at a great distance south of the Jumna. Now he has transferred it to the forest near Bithúr, at a short distance south of the Ganges. So the journey which you wish to take will not be a long one, and will not give you very much fatigue."

"This," said Sítá, "will make everything much easier. But you must go with me. It would give me no pleasure to go there alone. Lakshman, too, must be with us."

6. To this both Rám and Lakshman agreed, and Lakshman was told to make preparations for the journey. But trouble which neither Rám nor Sítá could foresee was hanging over their heads: the visit to be paid by Sítá was destined to last very much longer than they then expected or intended.

II. RÁM HEARS EVIL REPORTS AGAINST SÍTÁ.

1. Next day, as Rám was seated in the Council-hall at the usual hour, a minister, who wore a very serious look in his face, brought a report that a famine had broken out in one part of the kingdom, and that the people were complaining against the king.

"What is the cause of the famine?" asked Rám, "and why do the people complain against the king? A king does not cause a famine."

"They say, O king," answered the minister, "that

famine has broken out among your Majesty's subjects because of your sin in taking back Sítá after she had been for ten months a captive in the house of another man, Rávan. They say that you ought to put Sítá away; and how can it be maintained that they are wrong?"

2. "But it is well known," said Rám, "that after Rávan had been slain and Sítá brought out from Lanká, I refused to take her back, unless she could give me some proof of having remained pure and innocent during all those months in which she was in Rávan's power; it is well known, too, that she went through a blazing bonfire without once feeling the flame or taking any harm from it. Is not that a proof of innocence?"

"It is proof," said the minister, "to those who saw it. But the people of this kingdom of Kósala did not see it, and so they are not convinced. To them it proves nothing."

3. Rám was thunderstruck on hearing these words, but at the time he said nothing. When the Council had broken up for that day, he went to bathe in the tank that stood near the palace.

Now a certain man of the Washerman caste dwelt on the opposite side of the tank, and this man had a daughter who was married. It so happened that on the evening of the preceding day the daughter had left the house of her husband and passed the night in the house of her father. There was of course no harm in this, but evil tongues made mischief, and the husband refused to take her back.

4. While Rám was bathing in the tank, he heard the father say to his daughter's husband: "Take back your

wife, I pray you." But the husband refused and said: "I cannot. Your daughter went from my house in the evening, and I know not where she passed the night. I dare not take her back to be my wife. If I were a king like Rám, then indeed I might receive her, even though, like Sítá, she might have spent many months in the house of a stranger. But a poor man like me cannot do such things. My kinsmen might take counsel together and turn me out of my caste."

5. This was a terrible shock to Rám; but a greater one was still to come. Being indignant at the evil words spoken against Sítá, and convinced of her perfect innocence, he went into the chamber where she was sleeping. As he entered, she cried out in her sleep, "Ah, my lord, where are you? He is seizing me." She fancied in her dream that Rávan had come again with his chariot to carry her off.

On hearing her cries, Rám left the chamber in which she was lying and said to himself, "What a priceless blessing is a woman's love! In sickness or in health, in youth or in old age, in riches or in poverty, it is the greatest blessing that a man can have on earth. But alas! such happiness is rare and is too good to last. Evil tongues may poison truth and bring trouble into the purest household."

6. He had scarcely finished saying these words, when a chamberlain entered the room and said: "O Mahá-rája, Durmukha is standing at the door of the palace. What orders shall I give him?"

Now, Durmukha belonged to that dangerous class of



men whom it was the custom to employ in Eastern kingdoms for keeping the king or his chief minister informed of all that they heard or saw among the people. He was, in fact, a spy. Such men are dangerous, because it puts a great deal of power into their hands, and gives them the chance of making false reports against any one whom they dislike or who refuses to pay them enough by way of a bribe.

But this Durmukha was trusted by Rám, and he appeared to be quite honest. It was his custom to call in the evening at the king's palace and inform the king of anything that he had heard or seen on that day.

7. When Rám heard of Durmukha's arrival at the palace, he told the chamberlain to send him into the room. After what he had heard that day the king was eager to find out whether the spy had any bad news to report.

"Tell me," said the king, "what have you heard to-day? Good news, as usual?"

"I hear all men say," answered the spy, "that under the rule of Rám they are safe and happy."

"You bring me nothing but praise," said the king, "but if any one has a complaint against me, let me hear what it is, and I will try to remove the cause; for I do not employ you merely to find out what is said in my praise."

8. When Rám referred to complaints, the spy was startled and held his speech. Then drawing himself up he said, with a scared look and husky voice, "Great king, I have heard no reproach against you this day."

Suspecting from his uneasy manner that he had heard something which he did not like to repeat, Rám said to him : " I believe, O Durmukha, that you have heard some complaint, or you would not look so scared and speak with such a husky voice. Now tell me at once, and tell me in full, what you have heard, or I shall forbid you to come into my presence again. In fact you will be dismissed from the royal service."

9. Being thus pressed, he made the following confession : " Great king, it dries up the blood in my body to be compelled to repeat the words which I have been hearing of late. Your subjects with one voice declare that under the rule of King Rám they enjoy all the happiness which they have any right to expect, and that no other king of Ayódhyá ever made better laws or took more pains to have them obeyed.

" But the people (it pains me to tell you) are not satisfied about the queen. They say that though the king is very faithful to her and has never sought to obtain any other wife, she stayed a long time in a stranger's house. Rám, they say, took her back, relying on her innocence, but his faith in her does not alter the fact : henceforth, if our wives behave ill, we shall have to bear it ; for if we attempt to punish them, they will put us to silence by mentioning the case of Sítá who was allowed to go unpunished as if nothing had happened : the king is the master of religion as well as of the land : whatever example he sets in matters of religion, we, his subjects, are bound to follow.

" Great king, I have now told you all. You will pardon

me, I beg, for having repeated what I have heard. Rightly, indeed, was I named *Durmukha*, 'the man of evil mouth.' "

He then made his bow, and left the chamber overcome with grief.

III. RÁM DECIDES ON BANISHING SÍTÁ

1. Left alone to commune with his own thoughts, Rám was plunged into the deepest sorrow. "Unhappy wretch that I am," he said to himself, "I was compelled by the orders of my father to leave my kingdom and go into exile: my innocent wife, the loved of my soul, was carried off from our peaceful bower at Panchávati by that ten-headed monster, Rávan: now I am taunted by the people of this realm with having brought disgrace on the spotless honour of this noble race by taking back the wife, who has been all purity and goodness, and whom I know to be innocent. Surely I was born to be pursued with sorrow all my days. I must either bear the reproaches of the people and retain my throne in disgrace, or I must send away the innocent Sítá to win back and retain the respect of my subjects."

2. He debated in his mind which of the two courses he ought to adopt, but decided that very day to act on the latter. He had said to one of his ministers that he would sacrifice Sítá, the loved of his soul, if her presence displeased the people or brought dishonour on his crown; and from this profession, which he had made publicly in

the Council-hall, there was no going back. He felt that private happiness must not stand in the way of public duty.

He went once more into the chamber where Sítá was sleeping, and took one parting look. Then remembering that Sítá had no human mother, but had been found in a silver vessel where a plot of earth was being cleared for a sacrifice, he said : " O Mother Earth, I commit unto thy care thy spotless daughter, whom Rám is about to forsake. Protect her, I entreat thee, and keep her safe from harm."

Having said this he left her, with anguish in his heart, believing that he had seen her for the last time on earth.

3. Having fully made up his mind how he ought to act under the circumstances, Rám sent for Lakshman and explained to him the difficulty that he was in and how he had decided to act.

" A short time ago, as you will remember, O Lakshman, Sítá told us, after we had examined the picture together, that she would much like to pay a visit to the hermitage of Válmíki ; and she begged that you would go with her as well as myself. Now get the chariot ready to-morrow immediately after sunrise, and drive her to the hermitage (which now stands to the south of the Ganges) as if you were acting up to her request. Leave her within reach of the hermitage, and come back at once."

4. It was a terrible order for Rám to give and for Lakshman to carry out. The latter was very unwilling to undertake the task, but was compelled at last to obey the order of his elder brother. It seems strange that

neither of them thought of asking Sítá to undergo the fire-ordeal once more, doing it this time in Ayódhyá. This would have satisfied the people and put an end to all further trouble. But in human affairs it sometimes happens that the simplest remedies are not thought of at the time when they are most needed. It is too late to think of them, when the time for action has passed.

5. The anguish in the mind of Rám was so keen that for some time after she was gone he could not attend to his kingly duties. By degrees he shook off the grief that lay so heavy on his heart, and said to himself: "I have indeed done a very cruel thing in sending the innocent Sítá away; but it was done with an object and purely from a sense of duty. It is useless to go on deploring it. He who neglects his duties on account of a grief which cannot be cured is justly esteemed a sinner. From this moment, therefore, I shall try to bear my sorrows with patience, and carry on all my kingly duties as heretofore. I will so act that my subjects shall have no reason to complain that I am neglecting them. It was only through fear of their displeasure that I decided on sending her away. If now I allow myself to be so overpowered with grief that I can do nothing useful, I shall displease them more than ever, and the banishment of Sítá will have been in vain."

6. Having so resolved, he sent word to his ministers that from to-morrow he intended to return to his old hours of work, and that he would expect to see them in the Council-hall at the usual time.

Those who watched his outward behaviour said :
 “ Our king is a brave man : he has shaken off his grief
 and is giving full attention to the affairs of his kingdom.”
 But when he had finished the work of the day and retired
 to his private chamber, the old unhappiness returned.
 Beyond doing his duty as a king, he had no interest in life.
 There was no wife or child to share his joys or his sorrows.
 Sítá was the only woman on earth that he ever loved.

IV. SÍTÁ'S JOURNEY FROM AYÓDHYÁ TO THE GANGES.

1. Let us now turn to the subject of Sítá's journey from Ayódhyá to the Ganges. As soon as daylight appeared on the horizon, Lakshman ordered Sumantra the charioteer to get the chariot ready without delay and bring it round to the door of the palace, as the lady Sítá was about to visit the retreat of the great sage, Válmíki. Sumantra at once obeyed the order, drove the chariot round to the door of the palace, and sent in notice that he was prepared to start.

Lakshman went to Sítá's apartment and told her that the chariot was at the door. She, too, was ready to start ; for Lakshman had told her on the evening before, that they would have to start early next day before the sun had become very hot, but that Rám would not be able to go with them as he had urgent business to attend to.

2. Sítá was filled with joy when she heard from Laksh-

man that the chariot was ready. "I could not sleep for joy," she said, "with thinking that I was to start this morning. I was afraid that my lord would object to my going; it delights me beyond measure to know that he has given his full consent. In a former birth I must have done many acts of goodness, or I should not have had such a kind husband in the present birth."

With a look of delight that glanced in her eyes, she showed to Lakshman all the fine things that she was going to take with her to the wives and daughters of the sages living in Válmiiki's retreat. When all these had been placed in the chariot, Lakshman asked her to take her seat in the chariot, and they set off.

3. The travellers left Ayódhyá behind them and entered the open country. Sítá looked round on all the rustic scenes through which they passed, and the sight of them was a pleasant change after the many months that she had spent in the city. "I have to thank my lord," she said, "for the pleasure which has fallen to my lot. I am the most fortunate of women to receive such kindness."

Seeing how happy the simple-hearted Sítá was, and knowing what sort of kindness Rám was showing her, Lakshman was cut to the heart and could scarcely conceal from her the pain that he was suffering on her account.

4. In this way they pursued their journey for some time, when a cloud came suddenly over the face of Sítá, and she said to Lakshman :

"Up till now, my dear companion, I have been enjoying this drive; but I have just been seized with a feeling of

doubt and uneasiness. The lid of my right eye is twitching and my limbs are quivering. Why are the jackals howling in open day, and why are the deer fleeing from us on our left? These are bad signs. What can have happened, or what is going to happen, to make me feel so much disturbed? I now give up the idea of going to Válmíki's hermitage. I will go no further; let us return at once to Ayódhyá. Tell me, dear Lakshman, what I had better do. I feel as agitated as I did at Panchávatí, before Rávan carried me off. An idea has seized me, a dreadful fear has taken hold of me, that I shall not see my lord again in this birth."

5. Lakshman was very much perplexed at seeing the change which had come over the mind of Sítá. His face seemed to dry up and his skin to shrink; and the grating tone of his voice was not in harmony with his words: "Fear not, dear lady. The gods, who have protected the race of Raghu through so many centuries, will make everything work out for our good. The uneasiness from which you are suffering will pass away. We are all subject at times to fits of gloominess and doubt. The mind of man is never wholly at rest, and is liable, like the wind, to sudden changes. Your fears will subside."

6. His dried look and husky voice made her all the more uneasy. With greater agitation than she had shown before, she said to him: "O Lakshman, the sight of your face and the sound of your voice make me more anxious than ever. Never before have I seen you look so sad. Tell me what has happened. Hide nothing from me."

Is my lord well? I have not seen him since yesterday evening. If I could only see him now, what a relief it would be to me!"

"Lady," said Lakshman, "be not dismayed. It is the sight of your own distress which has disturbed me. It is this which has made such a change in my face and voice.



This change will disappear at once, if you will get rid of those gloomy thoughts which are not founded on fact."

7. While they were talking in this way they reached the bank of the river Gúmṭí. Just at this time the great Illuminator of the world was going to his evening rest on the top of the Asta mountain. The banks of the Gúmṭí are very pleasant at even-tide, and to any one, whose mind is burdened with sorrow or haunted with care, the calm

and rural aspect of this beautiful river gives relief. Sítá felt its influence. Her mind became as calm as the place, and her uneasiness left her.

8. They remained there for the night. Sítá was fatigued with the drive and still more so by the mental disturbance through which she had passed. She soon fell asleep, after they had had their evening meal. But before sleep came on, Lakshman entertained her with tales of the milkmaids who lived in that spot and the adventures that befell them, so that she might not dream of any subject that had given her pain that day. Thanks to the care and kindness of Lakshman, she had no return of the anxiety that had troubled her so much on the journey, and her sleep was not disturbed all that night.

9. When the sun had risen they took their seats in the chariot, and Sumantra drove them off from the banks of the Gúmtí. It made Sítá quite cheerful, after the sound sleep that she had had, to look on this side and that and see the beauties of the country through which they were going. No trace of yesterday's uneasiness could be seen in her face. They drove on from one village to another, till they reached the northern bank of the Ganges.

10. Here Lakshman, who had been so brave on the previous day, could not hide his feelings. "When I have taken her over the Ganges," he thought to himself, "I shall have to leave her alone on that side of the river and part with her for ever." How vexed he felt at having had such a duty imposed upon him by his elder brother! The thought of it was more than he could bear, and the

tears rose to his eyes in spite of all his efforts to repress them.

11. "What is it, O Lakshman," said the kind-hearted Sítá, "which has made you weep?" Lakshman dashed away the tears and said: "Lady, nothing has happened to bring tears to my eyes. But the sight of the Ganges has upset me. It brings to my remembrance the thought of the time when the sons of Sagara were reduced to ashes by the flame that flashed from the eyes of Kapila the sage, and it reminds me that they were brought back to life by Bhagí-ratha, the son of our king Dilípa, who spent a thousand years in the practice of severe austerities, by means of which he brought the Ganges down to the earth. By the waters of the sacred river the sons of Sagara were restored to life, purified from all their sins, and transported to heaven. It is a wonderful story; it shows the greatness of our ancestors, and I could not think of it without shedding tears of joy."

12. The simple-minded and guileless Sítá was satisfied with this tale, and being eager to cross the river she begged Lakshman to lose no time in getting everything ready for passing to the opposite bank. In a short time the boat was ready, and Lakshman took her across in it, having first told Sumantra to remain where he was with the chariot until he (Lakshman) returned.

13. The hermitage was not in sight; but while they were crossing the river, the boatman who rowed them across pointed to the quarter in which the hermitage might be found.

V. SÍTÁ IS TAKEN ACROSS THE GANGES
AND DESERTED.

1. They soon reached the south side of the river, and Sítá in her eagerness to get to the retreat began at once to turn her face in the direction pointed out by the boatman. Here Lakshman was obliged to stop her and said : " Lady, wait a little, I have something to say, and I must say it here."

" What has happened ? " said Sítá with an anxious look, " tell me at once."

" How shall I tell you ? " said Lakshman ; " I cannot put my lips together to speak the words. Little did I ever expect that, after all the service which I have rendered to my elder brother, it would fall to my lot to perform the hateful task which he has now imposed upon me. Would that I had died, before I lived to see such a day as this."

He then fell at her feet, as a tree falls when its roots are torn up from the ground by a violent wind.

2. Sítá put her hand in his and drew him up. She wiped the tears from his eyes with her sári or shawl. When he was a little recovered, she said to him in a tone of voice broken with grief : " Why, O Lakshman, are you thus moved ? Why do you wish that you had died, before you had seen this day ? There must be some cause, some very serious cause, for such an outburst. Now, perhaps, I shall know why I felt so sad and anxious yesterday, before we reached the Gúmtí. Speak, Lakshman, speak.

This suspense is more than I can bear.” In tones of anguish she pressed him again and again to explain matters.

3. Seeing what pain it gave her to be kept in suspense, Lakshman forced himself to speak. “O Sítá,” he said, “how shall I say it? but say it I must. You remained, as you know, some time in Rávan’s house apart from your proper protectors. On this account the citizens and villagers in many parts of the kingdom of Kósala have doubted your innocence, and idle tongues have been whispering evil reports against you. My elder brother has heard of all this, and at once, throwing aside the love and the respect due to such a faithful wife, he decided to send you away, so that he might wipe out this stain on his honour and regain from his subjects the esteem which he had lost. This hateful duty he has laid on me: ‘Take her,’ he said, ‘to see the retreat of Válmiki, and when you have approached it near enough for her to be able to find it, leave her and come back at once.’ I have now, O Sítá, explained the errand on account of which I was sent here, and the reason why, by the orders of Rám, I must now leave you.”

4. When she heard these words, Sítá fell fainting on the ground. Lakshman did all that he could to revive and soothe her. When she had revived, she fixed her eyes on Lakshman’s face like a woman who was out of her mind, and said nothing. Presently the tears came to her eyes, and these gave her some little relief, which enabled her to speak.

“Lakshman,” she said, “in a former birth I must

have committed some great crime, for which I am now bearing the penalty. We all have to reap the fruits of our works. I reap in this birth the fruits of what I did in a former one, though I do not know what my crime was. Perhaps in a former birth I destroyed the husband of some devoted wife, who loved him as fondly as Rám is beloved by me, and for this misdeed I am now punished. This is the only way in which I can account for the affliction which has now fallen upon me. I cannot and will not throw the blame on Rám. He is, I am sure, full of love and affection: he knows my innocence and how devoted I have been to him."

5. Then after a pause she continued her speech and said: "O Lakshman, the prospect of living in the woods does not alarm me at all. I lived with him for fourteen years in such places, and should have made no complaint, if I had remained with him in the forest to the end of my days. What pains me is this: when the wives of the sages ask me for what offence I have been banished and sent to live amongst them, I do not know what reason I can give. They regard him, I know, as an ocean of goodness. If I tell them the fact—that he listened to evil tongues—they will disbelieve it; for they will not consider that to be a sufficient reason for condemning me and sending me away. They will say that I must have done something very wicked since my return with him to Ayódhyá; for they know that I went through the ordeal of fire as soon as I was rescued from Lanká. Tell me, O Lakshman, what am I to say to them?"

6. Lakshman could give her no help. Seeing the state of helplessness to which she was reduced, he began to throw the blame on himself. "You, O Sítá, have done nothing wrong. The fault is mine. I have been guilty of a grievous sin in having consented to obey the command of my brother in this cruel business. How else could I have brought myself to take part in the banishment of a pure-hearted woman, who has ever been a devoted wife?"

Then changing his tone, he threw the blame on Rám for whom he was acting, and said :

"Hard-hearted one! If you believed that Sítá did not preserve her innocence while she remained in Lanká, what was the use of our taking so much trouble to rescue her from the clutches of Rávan? Why, if she was not innocent, were you plunged so deeply in grief when you found that you had lost her? Was there ever a man so heartless and cruel as you have been?"

7. Sítá here corrected him and said : "O Lakshman, blame neither thyself nor thy elder brother. Go back to him forthwith, and say what you can to relieve his mind. Tell him from me that I know he has acted from a sense of duty in banishing me as he has done. It is the first duty of a king to satisfy his subjects in all things, though it may cost him his happiness and even his life. Tell him that if through his fear of the people's reproaches it is necessary for me to live apart from him, he will none the less be always in my thoughts. Tell him, too, that I shall strictly attend to all the religious rites and duties

observed in the sacred retreat to which he has sent me, so that in the next birth he may still claim me as his wife."

8. Having so said, she took hold of Lakshman's hands; then with streaming eyes and broken voice she added: "Give me your oath, O Lakshman, that you will attend to him henceforth as carefully as you have been wont to do in past years; tell him (what you know to be true) that I have not spoken one word of reproach or blame against him for his having sent me away, that I am still his wife in spite of the distance that has been placed between us, and that my only happiness (if I continue to live at all) will be to hear that he is happy himself among his kindred and his subjects.

9. "I promise," said Lakshman, "to say all that you have asked me to say. But I too have a request to make. I pray that you will continue to love and respect me as you have hitherto done, and that you will pardon me for the injustice that I have done you in obeying the orders of my elder brother."

"O Lakshman," she said, "I shall never cease to love and respect you as before. I shall pray that in another birth I may have a brother-in-law like yourself. Now leave me; return to Ayódhyá."

Then one more thought entered her mind. "Tell Bharat and Shatrughna and their wives, whom I regard as my sisters, that my love for them is unabated, and will never be less than it always has been. Say the same to my mothers-in-law, Kausalyá, Kaikéyí, and Sumitrá. Say

that Sítá's love for them, though she will never see them again, will remain unchanged till her death."

10. With these and such like blessings she begged him to leave her and recross the river. He tried to say something, but was so choked with sobs that he was unable to speak. He moved towards the boat and entered it as unwillingly as if he felt ashamed to leave her. The boatman pushed off ; but so long as Sítá was in sight the faithful Lakshman could not take his eyes off her, but stood gazing at her receding form till he reached the opposite bank.

Sítá, too, stood gazing at the boat like one entranced, and caught a faint view of him as he mounted the chariot and drove off. Then a sense of utter dreariness came over her, as she stood alone on the south side of the broad river, cut off for the rest of her life from all ties of home and country.

Unhappy Sítá, purest and best of women! this, then, was to be the reward for thy unfailing goodness,—widowed, yet not a widow,—banished for no fault by the man to whom thou hadst given thy life,—cast adrift without friend or helper in a lonely wilderness!

VI. SÍTÁ FINDS REFUGE IN VÁLMIKI'S HERMITAGE.

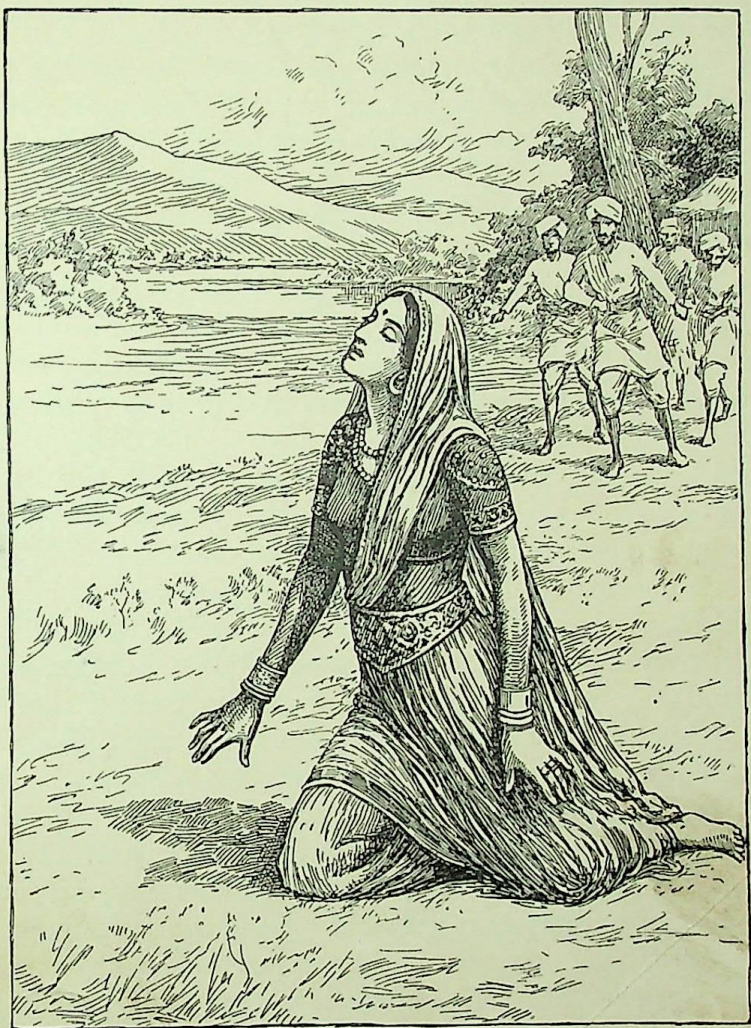
1. Slowly and sadly she wandered on towards the place where she thought the hermitage might be. The midday sun was blazing overhead like a furnace. Her feet, tender

as the newly-blown rose, were blistered with the heat of the sand; her throat was parched with thirst; and there was no tree in sight to give her the hope of finding a temporary shelter. Though no human helper was at hand, the wild beasts which had come from the forest were kind. They surrounded her on all sides and protected her from harm. The birds descended from the sky to shelter her with their wings, while others dipped their pinions in the water of the river and fanned her with the cooling air.

2. But she had not yet caught sight of the hermitage of Válmíki, and her strength failed her. She lay on the ground and gave vent to her grief. The sounds of her wailing were heard by the pupils of the sage, and they came up to the place where she was lying. The sight moved them to pity. While some remained at her side, others at once repaired to the hermitage and told their master what they had seen.

“We were walking,” they said, “in the wood which fringed the bank of the river, looking for fruits, roots, the Kusha grass used in sacrifice, and sticks for fuel. Hearing a sound of wailing that came from the sand and seemed to be the wailing of a woman, we went to it, and there we found a woman of uncommon beauty, who was immersed in grief like a desolate widow, whose husband had just been slain. We asked her no questions, but went immediately to tell you what we had seen. Now, O preceptor, tell us what we are to do.”

3. As soon as the great sage had heard what his pupils



told him, he begged them to lead him to the spot. He found the spot where she lay, and standing over her he spoke to her in kind and comforting words :

“ Arise, O daughter, and take courage. Before I came here, I knew who you were and what has brought you here. I was the spiritual guide and instructor of your father, Janaka, the King of Vidéha. You were wedded at Mithilá. You are the daughter-in-law of the late King Dasaratha, the sovereign of Ayódhyá. You are the wedded wife and rání of that world-wide ruler, Rám-Chandra, who, listening to the unfounded reproaches of the people, was perplexed in mind and banished you to this place, pure and innocent though you are. I know all this through the power that my mind has acquired by living the life of a hermit. Fear not: I will take care of you.”

4. Cheered by these comforting words, she dried her tears and stood up. Seeing the sage close in front of her and knowing who he was, she placed the end of her sári round her neck, and bowed low at his feet. Válmíki raised her, blessed her, and said : “ May the race of Raghu be continued by you.”

5. He then took her by the hand and said : “ Child, there is no reason for you to remain here any longer. Come with me to my hermitage, where I will watch over you as if you were my own daughter. So long as you live in my hermitage, you need not be anxious about anything. Those who live in villages are afraid of being attacked by wild beasts and tremble at the thought of living in the woods. But in a hermit's retreat there is no chance

of risk or danger. By the power of our devotions wild animals lose their fierceness, and live in friendliness with each other and with us. Here everything is peaceful; here your sorrows will cease."

6. When she was about to start, he said to her: "You will soon become a mother. When your son is born (for you will not give birth to a daughter) all those rites, which should be observed from infancy onwards, will be performed in my hermitage as perfectly as if you were in Ayódhyá. The daughters of the sages will be your companions. You will feel soothed in their company. Your father Janaka has been one of my chief friends all his life, so that living with me you may have all the happiness and peace of mind that you would have in living at a father's house."

7. Having so said, he led her on and brought her into the hermitage. There he delivered the unhappy exile into the hands of the daughters of the sages. They were much pleased at having such a charge entrusted to them, and as far as they could they soothed her distress with kind words and kind attentions.

VII. THE BIRTH AND TRAINING OF SÍTÁ'S TWIN SONS, KUSHA AND LAVA.

1. Sítá had not been long in the hermitage before she gave birth to twin sons. The sage Válmíki performed all the prescribed birth-rites. Among the earliest of these

rites was that of naming the boys. He called the elder Kusha, because immediately after his birth he was placed on a bed of kusha grass, and the younger Lava, because at the time of his birth he came in contact with a blade of the same grass. The daughters of the sages were much delighted at the birth of these infants, and sounds of joy were heard in all parts of the hermitage.

Sítá, too, shared in the general rejoicing; but after a while the old grief returned and could not be suppressed. Her happiest moments were at the time when she had the babes on her knee and heard them making their first attempts to speak, or saw the little white teeth begin to appear in their gums like rows of pearls.

2. When they were five years of age, the great sage Válmiki performed on them the ceremony of tonsure, leaving one tuft of hair on the top of the crown. Soon after he undertook the task of teaching them to read. He found them both very clever, endowed by nature with keen memories and quick intelligence. They soon acquired a mastery of the books which he put into their hands.

But Válmiki had a much greater line of study in store for them. He had spent much time in writing the sublime poem called *Rámáyana*, which describes the deeds and exploits of Rám—how he was taken away with Lakshman by Visvámitra to combat the fiends and Rákshasas of the forest, who destroyed the altars of the hermits—how he broke the bow of Shiva in an open contest at Mithilá and by this achievement won Sítá, the daughter of King

Janaka, as his bride—how he was banished for fourteen years through the evil influence of Kaikéyí to make room for her own son, Bharat—how he was accompanied in all the toils and dangers through which he passed by his noble-minded wife, Sítá—how he visited Válmiiki's own hermitage—how he wandered away from hermitage to hermitage to southern India, where Sítá was captured by the demon Rávan—how with the aid of an army of huge monkeys he invaded Lanká, slew the monster-fiend, and rescued Sítá—how finally he returned with Sítá to Ayódhyá, the fourteen years of banishment being now completed.

By degrees the two boys learnt all this wonderful poem by heart, and recited it to their mother line after line with their musical voices.

3. At the age of eleven they were invested by Válmiiki with the sacred thread, which placed them among the ranks of the twice-born. All this time the two lads had no notion who they were. They believed that they were the sons of some hermit of the woods. They knew, of course, that the woman who was called Sítá in the hermitage of Válmiiki was their mother; but that this Sítá was the daughter of the king of Mithilá and wife of the sovereign of Ayódhyá was a fact of which they had no notion. Válmiiki had taken care to hide it from them, and he had cautioned all the other inhabitants of the hermitage to be silent on these subjects, whenever the boys were present. He had also cautioned Sítá herself to leave the boys in total ignorance about their origin and parentage; for he

knew in his own mind that a time would come when it might be expedient to bring the facts to light.

4. Sítá herself had no desire to talk about the subject to her two sons. When they were still very young, she gave up all her time and thought to looking after their



health and safety ; so they grew up strong and tall, well worthy of the warrior-caste to which they belonged by birth. As they became older and did not need her care so much, she followed the same pursuits as the other women of the hermitage. She collected sticks for fuel, kusha grass for placing offerings on the altar, and edible fruits wherever she could find them. In the day-time, when her mind was thus occupied, she appeared to be

cheerful ; but at night-time, when she was left to her own thoughts, the old grief returned.

5. In this way twelve years passed slowly by from the time when the two boys were born. As the grief was never off her mind, the beauty, for which she had once been so well known, gradually faded. She seemed, in fact, to be wasting away, as if her life was drawing to its close. But in all these years no feeling of anger against Rám ever once rose in her breast. Never did she think that her husband deserved any blame for the part that he had played in banishing her from his house ; neither did she throw the blame on herself. She thought that it was her own ill-fate which had plunged her in such an ocean of misfortune.

VIII. RÁM PREPARES TO CELEBRATE A HORSE-SACRIFICE.

1. Eleven or twelve years after the banishment of Sítá, it entered the mind of Rám to celebrate an Aswa-médh or "horse-sacrifice." This was the greatest kind of sacrifice that a monarch in ancient India could undertake, and none but a sovereign of wide domain and very high rank could venture to perform it.

At such a time Bráhmans were invited to attend from all parts of the kingdom or empire ; hermits, rishis, and sages were invited to come from the surrounding forests ; and princes from the neighbouring kingdoms. All visitors

were received and maintained as guests of the king so long as the sacrifice lasted, and when the sacrifice was over they were dismissed with valuable gifts.

The horse selected for the purpose was allowed to wander wherever it willed for one whole year. If during that year it was seized by any prince, this implied that the prince who had seized it was ready to challenge the sovereignty of the king who owned it. But if no one seized it, the horse was considered fit to be sacrificed, and the ceremony was performed.

During the year in which the horse was allowed to wander, messengers were sent round to all whom the king wished to invite, and buildings or tents of various kinds and sizes were made ready for receiving them.

2. A sovereign might have various reasons for celebrating a horse-sacrifice. It might be done for the purpose of asserting his sovereignty among neighbouring princes. Or it might be done in the hope of obtaining some special favour from the higher powers, as when Dasaratha, the father of Rám, sacrificed a horse in order to obtain the birth of sons.

Rám's object was quite different. For some time past he had been troubled in his mind for having slain a Bráhmaṇ; for Rávan, whom he had slain in Lanká when he rescued Sítá, was the grandson of Pulastya (a very eminent Bráhmaṇ of ancient times), and was therefore by birth a Bráhmaṇ. For the welfare and safety of mankind it was necessary that Rávan should be slain. Yet to kill a Bráhmaṇ was held to be one of the greatest of

sins. For having done this Rám considered that he ought to make some atonement, by which he could be cleared of guilt.

3. Before taking any steps in the matter he informed Vasishta, the great Bráhmaṇ who had been the family priest of Dasaratha, of the project that he had formed in his mind, and asked his advice concerning it.

“Great king,” said Vasishta, “thou hast decided well. Thou art ruler of ocean, air, and earth; and no other king has been able to perform the deeds which thou hast done. No such happiness, no such prosperity has ever before prevailed among the people of Kósala. To complete thy greatness the only thing left for thee to do is the performance of a horse-sacrifice.

“We were already aware that we ought to advise thee to take this step. We are all the more pleased that thou hast thought of doing it of thine own free choice, without waiting to be advised by us. There is no reason for putting off this most important duty. Therefore do it at once, O king, without feeling any doubt.”

4. When Vasishta had finished speaking, Rám turned to his younger brothers and said: “You have heard what our family priest has said; now let me know what you think of the matter.”

The younger brothers—Bharat, Lakshman, and Shatrughna—were all present at the time when Vasishta spoke, and all of them at once signified their entire approval.

5. Rám then turned to Vasishta and said: “O storehouse of virtue, when my wish is in agreement with your

own and with that of the princes, my younger brothers, there can be no doubt that the sacrifice should be performed. What we have to decide upon is the place for the performance. My own wish is that the plain of Naimisha, which lies along the bank of the Gúmtí and is a sacred tract, should be the place selected." Vasishta immediately agreed to this also.

6. Rám then turned to his younger brothers and said :

"I now desire that you will set to work immediately, since there is no reason for delay, and there is much to be done. First of all let messengers be sent round to invite our guests ; let them be sent to all towns and villages near or distant so that the news may be spread as widely as possible. Invite with all honour and respect those who in times past endured much fatigue and toil in helping us : it will give me very great pleasure if they come. Above all, invite the sages and hermits of the forest ; their coming will add much to the merit of the sacrifice and to the honour of my kingdom.

"Bharat, go without delay to the plain of Naimisha. Select the most suitable part of the great plain for holding the sacrifice and have the ground enclosed.

"Lakshman, I place you in charge of the food-supply. Vast multitudes will come to the plain to witness the sacrifice. Take care, therefore, that the supplies which you collect will be sufficient. You are a careful and far-seeing person ; so I need not say more to you.

"Shatrughna with the help of Bharat will attend to

the comforts of the princes when they are assembled. He can now help Lakshman to collect the stores."

7. When Rám had finished speaking, Vasishta turned to him and said :

"Great king, there is no doubt that everything will be perfectly done under the orders which you have just given. But I foresee one great obstacle (which did not strike me at first) to the performance of this sacrifice. Of this obstacle you should now be informed."

"Let me hear it," said Rám ; "what are your fears ?"

"Great king," said the family priest, "our sacred law-books direct that the rites of religion cannot be properly accomplished by a king without the help of his wife. For the performance of the horse-sacrifice it is ruled that for the whole period of one year, during which the horse is wandering abroad, the king who gives the sacrifice must have a drawn sword placed between himself and his wife at night-time, and that he must not even touch her. As you have no wife, how can this rule be complied with ?"

8. When Rám heard this, his face fell and the tears rose to his eyes. He remained for some time downcast and silent. Then drawing a deep sigh he turned to Vasishta and said : "O storehouse of virtue, I had not thought of this before. Now tell me if you can what I should do."

"I see no way out of the difficulty," said the priest, "but that you should take another wife."

At the thought of taking another wife Rám's whole nature immediately rebelled. Here the greatness of his character shone out at once. The more Vasishta urged

him to adopt this course, the more determined he was to reject it. "No," said he, "I ruined her life as well as my own by sending her away to satisfy popular clamour. I never doubted her innocence. I have never ceased to love her. If she is dead, I love her memory still. No other wife shall ever pass the threshold of my house. The horse-sacrifice must be given up. I will not have it performed, if its performance will cast any slur upon the spotless Sítá."

9. As Rám was immovable, and as all were very desirous that the sacrifice should be held, they proposed that a golden statue of Sítá should be made, and that Rám should pass his nights by the side of this statue, and that a drawn sword should be placed between him and the statue. To this Rám agreed.

It was proposed at the same time (and to this also Rám agreed) that the golden statue of Sítá should be taken with Rám to the place of the intended sacrifice, and placed by the side of Rám's chair during the performance.

10. Everything being now settled, Bharat set out for Naimisha, fixed upon a convenient place for the sacrifice, and put up rows of dwellings or tents for visitors below the rank of princes or sages. For visitors of a higher class more stately dwellings were erected.

Lakshman, without losing any time, began buying immense stores of grain and saw that they were despatched to the right place.

Afterwards Rám himself, accompanied by his mother and other relations who lived in the palace at Ayódhyá,

went to the plain of Naimisha, and was pleased to see that everything was being carried out in the way that he desired.

11. Messengers were sent round to all parts of the kingdom and to neighbouring princes who lived beyond the border. Some days after, the invited guests began to arrive. Hundreds of princes with their attendants and nobles came in. Thousands of sages and hermits, from the different retreats scattered at intervals in the great forest, appeared on the plain to see the sacrifice. Crowds of villagers and townspeople poured in.

Bharat and Shatrughna waited on the princes and saw that they were provided with all that they needed. A special officer, who had himself once been a servant of rishis, looked after the sages and hermits. Sugriva, the great monkey-king, who had given much valuable help to Rám in the invasion of Lanká, attended to the wants of the other guests.

IX. VÁLMÍKI IS INVITED TO ATTEND THE HORSE-SACRIFICE.

1. We must now turn our eyes from the brilliant scenes that were being enacted on the plain of Naimisha, and see what Válmíki was doing in his quiet hermitage on the south side of the Ganges.

He had for some time past been anxious about his three guests—Sítá and her two sons, Kusha and Lava.

He saw plainly that Sítá was wasting away in sorrow and neglect, and could not live much longer unless some change could be made in her condition. He saw, too, that the boys, being princes by birth and now about twelve years of age, ought not to remain in his retreat any longer, but should go out and see the world and learn how a kingdom ought to be governed. It was impossible for them to acquire any knowledge of this kind in the quiet life of a hermitage.

He felt that Rám ought to take back his wife, and thus gradually remove from her mind the sorrow which was slowly killing her. She might then recover her health, and the boys would have a chance of learning from their father what he himself could not teach them.

2. Having come to this decision, he began to consider what would be the best way of carrying it out. "Should I send," he said to himself, "one of my own pupils to Ayódhyá and beg Rám to visit us in this retreat? Or should I go myself to the king's palace, ask for an interview, and beg the king to receive his wife and sons? He surely could not turn a deaf ear to my advice, if he knew that he had a wife and two sons living in my hermitage."

3. Then a doubt came over him whether after all there was any chance of success in either plan. He was afraid that Sítá would never be taken back, unless her innocence could be proved before the people by some test which no one could contradict. How could this be done?

"In any case," he said to himself, "whether Sítá can be taken back or not, the two boys are the sons of a king and ought to be with their father. If they learn nothing

about king-craft, I shall be blamed for having kept them in this hermitage. I must hesitate no longer. I must either send word to Rám or take counsel with Bharat and Lakshman and hear what they advise."

4. While he was weighing these points in his mind, a messenger arrived from Rám, inviting the sage to attend the horse-sacrifice which was about to be celebrated on the plain of Naimisha. This was a great relief to the mind of Válmíki. "The gods," he said, "have shown me great kindness in putting this chance in my way. Now I shall be able to carry out my object without being obliged to send any messages or ask for any favours. I will go to the horse-sacrifice, and take some of my pupils with me, among them Kusha and Lava. Rám and his relations seeing the two lads will recognise them as Rám's own offspring. If he does but see them, his heart will yearn towards them, and my object will be fulfilled."

5. Having thus settled everything in his own mind, Válmíki went to Sítá's bower and said to her: "Dear Sítá, Rám Chandra, the king of Ayódhyá, is about to perform a great horse-sacrifice, and I have been invited to be present. I wish to take your two sons with me as my pupils to witness the ceremony." Sítá immediately assented.

6. He then sent for Kusha and Lava and said to them: "Up to this time you have seen nothing of the world outside this quiet hermitage. I have now got a chance of taking you with me to witness a grand public ceremony, which will take place very shortly on the plain of Naimisha.

Rám Chandra, the sovereign of Kósala, of whom you have heard so much in the great poem which I have written, the *Rámáyana*, is about to perform a horse-sacrifice. Multitudes of people of all classes will be assembled. You will be asked to recite the great poem, in which Rám's life and actions are described. All who hear your recital will declare that no such king ever reigned before. To see him with your own eyes will give you much pleasure."

7. Tears rose to the eyes of Sítá when she heard this speech; for a terrible thought now entered her mind. "Has he taken another wife? How else can he perform a horse-sacrifice?" Her father, Janaka, King of Vidéha, had once celebrated such a sacrifice; and from what happened at that time she knew that Rám would not be qualified to perform the ceremony, unless he slept for one whole year with a drawn sword placed between himself and his wife.

Up till now she had believed without any doubt that he had sent her away out of sheer necessity to satisfy the evil tongues of her accusers, but that his love for her and his faith in her innocence were as great as ever. To have been banished by him for such a reason was a terrible blow, and had made her life miserable; but to be supplanted in his affections by another wife,—the thought of such a thing was enough to kill her.

8. While she was engaged in these gloomy thoughts, her two sons came up and said words which gave her timely relief:—

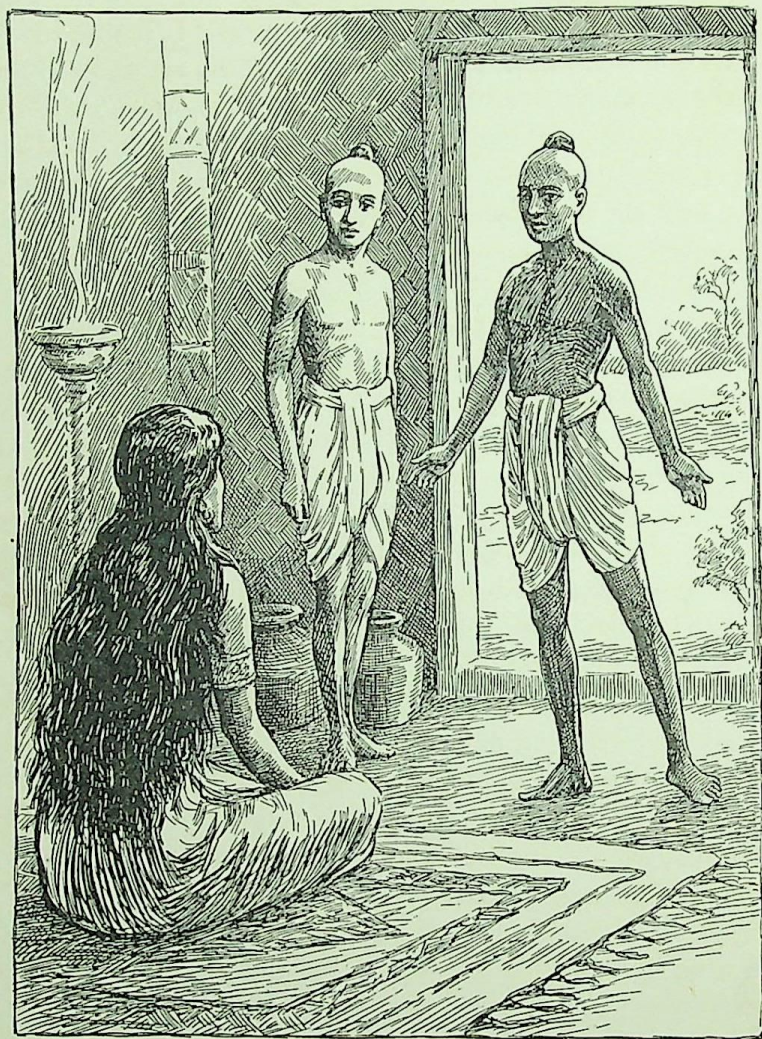
"Listen, Mother. We have been having a talk with

the messenger who was sent here by Rám Chandra, the king. From what we have read and learnt about this king in the poem written by our teacher, Válmíki, we had already formed a very great respect for his virtues. But now our respect has been very much increased. The messenger has told us that as the horse-sacrifice could not be performed without the help of a wife, the king had been advised by his ministers to take another wife for the purpose, and that he has rejected the advice with scorn: so they have made a golden figure of Sítá, which he will use instead of Sítá herself.

"Now, Mother, this is a wonderful case. No such king has ever before reigned in the world. He was very careful to fulfil the duties of a king, when he banished his wife in order to satisfy his subjects! Now he is equally careful to fulfil the duties of a lover and to show his people that though he banished his wife to please them, he never himself believed that she had been other than perfectly pure, true, and innocent.

"We have read of many other kings from books which our great teacher, the sage Válmíki, placed in our hands; but we have not read of any king who equals Rám Chandra of Ayódhyá. We have a great desire to see this king. Now is the chance. Give us leave, O Mother, and we will go with the sage and see this Rám of whom we have heard so much."

Sítá shed tears again, but this time they were tears of joy, not of grief. She readily gave her two sons leave to go to the sacrifice.



9. Early in the morning, next day, the great sage Válmíki, accompanied by Kusha, Lava, and his other disciples, set off for the plain of Naimisha; and they reached it late in the evening of the following day. They were warmly welcomed by the venerable Vasishta, who led them to the tent which had been provided for them within the encampment.

10. It happened that the place chosen for their tent was near enough to the royal throne to enable the two boys to have a clear view of Rám, their unknown father. "Look, brother," said one of them, "those noble qualities which are described so fully in the great poem, the *Rámáyana*, are manifest in his face, his stature, and bodily form. One has only to look at him to perceive that he is endowed with all kingly virtues. Our master could not have composed such a grand poem, if he had not had a grand subject to write about. The lofty genius of the poet is matched by the lofty character of his hero."

11. By degrees the invited guests arrived, together with some others who had not been invited. The sacrifice was taken in hand on the appointed day, and was celebrated with very great splendour. The hungry had more food given to them than they needed; those who had no money received more than they asked for; those who were landless received some gift of land; those who were ill-clad received gifts of cloth woven by skilful artificers; the orphans and the destitute were provided for. On all sides were dancing, singing, and playing on musical instruments; signs of pleasure were to be seen on every face. The

rishis and sages who had come to the sacrifice said that they had never before witnessed such a feast. This horse-sacrifice was the greatest event in the reign of Rám since his return in triumph to Ayódhyá.

X. RECITAL OF EXTRACTS FROM THE "RÁMÁYANA" BY KUSHA AND LAVA.

1. In the midst of all this banqueting and excitement, Válmíki, sitting alone in his tent, began to consider within himself how he was to get the great object of his visit carried out. "I came here to do something more than see this sacrifice," he said to himself, "but up to this time I have done nothing towards it. How shall I contrive to put Kusha and Lava, the two sons, in the way of Rám, their father? Shall I take them boldly into the royal tent? Or shall I find some excuse for asking the king to come into my tent, and then introduce him to his two sons and beg him to take Sítá back?"

2. After revolving the subject for some time in his mind, he thought that the best way of bringing the two lads to the notice of the king would be by causing them to make recitals in the king's presence from the great poem which they had learnt by heart. So he called them to him and said:

"It will give much pleasure to the rishis and sages assembled here, and also to the princes, citizens, and villagers, if you, my sons, will go and stand before their

tents, or wherever you may find them, and recite and sing passages of the *Rámáyana*, accompanying your voices with the music of the harp. Do this of your own accord, without waiting to be asked ; and do it in different places on different days.

"Perhaps the king may hear of your recitals and send a message requesting you to sing and play in his presence. If he does this, go immediately and do what he asks. In his presence you will have to be very discreet in your manner, and show him all possible respect. The king is looked upon as the father of all his people ; so you must behave to him as you would behave to a father.

"If he is pleased with your singing and playing, as I am sure he will be, and offers to give you a reward, do not show any desire to accept it, but say to him, 'Great king, we are dwellers in the woods, living in a hermit's retreat ; we sustain life by roots and fruits and anything else that we may happen to find in the forest ; we have no need of money ; we never see it or use it in our hermitage.' If he should then ask you who you are, tell him that you are disciples of the sage, Válmíki."

3. The two boys understood all that Válmíki had told them. They went about from one part of the immense encampment to another, singing passages from the *Rámáyana* with their sweet voices, and accompanying their recitals with the harp. All who heard them were delighted.

What else could have been expected ? In the first place Rám's own life was very beautiful and holy ; in the second, the words of the poetry were beautiful and

charming ; in the third, the faces of the two boys were very attractive, and their voices were so sweet that the note of the kókil would have sounded harsh in comparison ; in the fourth, they handled the harp with a dexterity that could not have been surpassed. Who could have helped being moved and charmed by the combination of so much sweetness ?

4. The recitals and singing of the two boys were talked about all over the encampment, and by degrees the rumour of them came to the ears of the king. "Great king," said one of the royal attendants who had heard of the recital, "there are two beautiful boys in the encampment, children of some sage or hermit, as we gather from their simple attire : they are singing the scenes of your wonderful life, which is told in the most beautiful words, and they are accompanying their songs with the strings of the harp. Every one who hears them is pleased, and some are even moved to tears. They are twin brothers, and are very much like each other in face and stature. We do not know who has written the beautiful poetry in which the events of your life are told ; but we have never before heard poetry to match it. Great king, we beg of you to have the two boys brought before you. Let them stand in front of your throne, and sing and play before you as they have done before others."

5. Rám immediately sent one of his counsellors to bring them into his tent. On hearing that the king had sent for them, they at once set out, taking their harps with them. On entering the royal tent they

made their bow before the king and stood waiting for his orders.

As soon as Rám saw them, a feeling came over him which it would not be possible to describe ; for he did not know himself whether the source of it was one of joy or of sorrow. He fixed his eyes upon the boys like one in doubt, and being unable to guess why such a feeling had come over him, he sat as motionless as a statue and said nothing.

6. The boys at last broke the silence. Coming forward, they saluted the king with the words, "May the king be victorious"; and in a humble and respectful manner enquired, "Great king, why hast thou called us?"

Rám now for the first time perceived in their form and features a great resemblance to himself and Sítá. He was forced to hide his feelings at that time, as many persons were present in the royal tent. Without showing any emotion he said, "I have just heard that your singing and recitals give much pleasure to all who hear them. Now sing to me for a short time, that I also may have the pleasure of hearing you."

"Great king," they replied, "that song which we sing is a very long poem, which it would take many days to recite in full. In it the life of the great king of Ayódhyá is described in all particulars. Now, if you command, we will sing only a short extract."

7. Rám's feelings were by this time so much disturbed that he was afraid he might not be able to contain himself if he had to listen to a long recital. He desired to break up the assembly as soon as he could, and retire into his

private tent. So he said to them, "Sing me only a short extract now. From to-morrow come here again and sing every day. In this way I shall be able to hear the whole poem from your mouths."

The king and the courtiers were all much delighted with the short recital which they heard. The king was greatly surprised at the beauty of the poem, and enquired of the boys, "Who wrote this poem, and from whom have you learnt it?"

"Great king," said the boys, "this poem was composed by the sage Válmíki, in whose hermitage we have been brought up, and we have learnt it from him."

"It is a fine poem," said Rám, "and we must hear the whole of it. But no more to-day. Evening is setting in. Go now to your tent, and come back to-morrow after the morning's meal."

Having dismissed the boys with these words, the king broke up the assembly for that day and retired to his private tent, where he fell into a sad and thoughtful mood and passed a sleepless night.

XI. RECITAL OF THE WHOLE POEM BEFORE RÁM, THE KING.

1. The rumour soon spread throughout the encampment at Naimisha that the great sage, Válmíki, taking the life of Rám for his subject, had composed a beautiful poem of great length in the finest language; that this poem was

to be recited and sung from beginning to end by two boys who had been the pupils of the sage in his hermitage; and that the recital and singing would begin next day in the presence of the king and his court.

The news spread rapidly, and great excitement prevailed all over the encampment. The recital of the *Rámáyana*, the most beautiful poem ever written in India, was the main event which distinguished this horse-sacrifice from every other held before or since.

2. As soon as the morning dawned, every one, whether sage or prince or merchant, or whatever his rank might be, was eager to obtain a seat, and a crowd collected in front of the royal tent. The brilliancy of this day's court was of a kind that no one would forget who saw it. The king was seated on his throne. His brothers, Bharat, Lakshman, and Shatrughna, had seats on his right; and those who had helped him in the war against Rávan—Sugriva, Vibhishana, and others—had seats on his left. The dowager-queens, Kausalyá (the king's mother), Kaikeyí, and Sumitrá, together with the wives of Rám's brothers, had seats allotted to them in a place set apart for that purpose.

3. The court being thus assembled, the guests of different kinds and classes took their places, some being seated, others standing. Many were compelled to stand, as it was not possible to find a seat for every one.

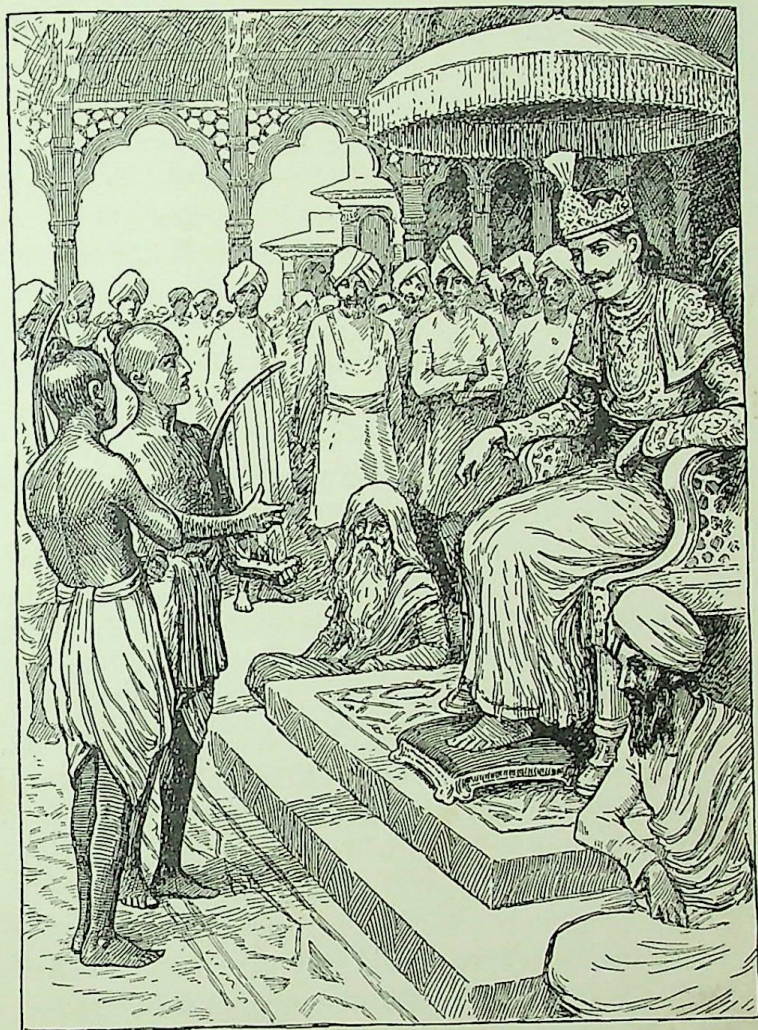
While the people were talking about the wonderful poem and the pair of sweet reciters and songsters, Válmiki, accompanied by Kusha and Lava, appeared at the door;

and then a great hubbub of voices arose. The audience, as soon as he entered with the two boys, rose and saluted him. None remained seated but the king and the ránís.

4. The great sage and his two pupils were led to the spot which had been reserved for them, and every one was now impatient to hear the recital begin. Válmíki, having cast his eyes round the whole assembly, turned his face towards the king and said to him, "Great king, all are now eager to hear; with your permission the recital shall begin." The king signified his assent by a nod; and Kusha and Lava, accompanying their voices on the harp, began to recite and sing.

5. The king listened with rapt attention to the strains of the hermit-minstrels and to the words which they recited from memory with unfailing accuracy. His whole soul was stirred by the fine language of the poem, the sweetness of the singers' voices, and the noble bearing of the singers themselves.

Every one in the audience was moved; such a recital had never been heard before. Among the listeners were heralds versed in ancient histories, Bráhmans versed in the rites of worship, minstrels learned in the lore of music, poets fired with lofty thoughts, men who studied the motions of heavenly bodies and could discern auspicious days, men who studied science and logic, Bháts or bards versed in the family legends of illustrious houses, artists skilled in the painting of pictures, and men of many other classes and degrees. All remained hushed and silent, listening with rapture to the recital of the wonderful poem.



6. Twenty cantos of the epic were recited by the time that the sun began to go down, when Rám stopped the recital and said in a loud voice, "I know not who these boy-minstrels may be; but let them be paid a fee of eighteen thousand pieces of gold."

"Not so," answered the boys, "we are children of the forest and dwell in a forest retreat. Gold and silver do not suit our forest life, and would be of no use to us."

"Noble lads!" answered Rám, "tell me once more who composed this beautiful poem?"

"It was composed," said they, "by Válmíki, the sainted hermit who lives in a forest retreat near Bithúr, to the south of the sacred river, the Ganges. It consists of twenty-four thousand lines, and is divided into five hundred cantos. All thy matchless deeds and exploits, O monarch, are depicted in this poem. If thou art willing, we will recite the whole poem to thee; but the recital will take many days."

"Be it so," said the king, "I will hear the whole. Come every day until the poem is finished."

The assembly was then broken up for that day, and the boys, showing no signs of fatigue, returned to their tent with Válmíki.

7. Similar recitals were made from day to day, until the poem was brought to an end. It was then proclaimed by the voice of a herald that the recitals were finished, and that no more meetings in front of the royal throne were to be held.

XII. KUSHA AND LAVA ARE RECOGNISED BY KAUSALYÁ, THE MOTHER OF RÁM.

1. While the recital was in progress, Kausalyá, the mother of Rám, was so much struck with the resemblance between the boys and their parents, that she was determined to find out the facts. When the recitals were finished, the boys were sent for and brought up to her. She embraced them fondly and said, "What are the names of your father and mother?"

"We do not know," said they, "who is our father; up to this time we have not seen him. Our mother is a devotee, living in the hermitage of Válmiiki who brought us up. She bears the same name as that of Rám's wife; but we have been told by every one in the hermitage that, though she bears the same name by accident, she is an entirely different person."

"What is your mother like?" said Kausalyá.

The boys described her appearance as well as they could. From the description which they gave it was considered certain that they were the sons of Sítá, the daughter of king Janaka of Vidéha and the ráni of Rám Chandra of Ayódhya, who had been banished by him about twelve years ago to stop the evil tongues of his subjects.

"How is your mother? Is she in good health?" asked Kausalyá.

"She looks," said they, "as if she had almost parted with life. She seems to be wasting away. She has long

been very unhappy, and has some great sorrow always on her mind. We fear that unless her sorrow can be removed, she cannot remain much longer alive."

2. Kausalyá felt very sad on hearing this, and begged Lakshman (who was present and had heard everything that passed) to bring Válmíki into her presence at once. When Válmíki appeared, all who were present in that assembly arose from their seats and gave him a respectful greeting. Kausalyá, as soon as he was seated, approached him with joined hands and said :

"O storehouse of truth and virtue, in mercy tell me all that you know about these two boys and their mother."

Válmíki then related in the hearing of every one all that had befallen Sítá, the wife of Rám, since the day when Lakshman had left her on the south side of the Ganges, and he described in vivid colours the unhappy life that Sítá had led since her banishment. The tale which he told them filled them all with heart-felt grief and the keenest sense of pity.

3. But it was now proved beyond doubt that Sítá, the wife of Rám, was still alive, and that the boy-minstrels, who had charmed the assembled audience with their recitals, were her sons. Kusha and Lava, on learning the secret of their birth, of which they had been kept so long in ignorance, were excited beyond measure. "Child Kusha and child Lava," said the great sage, "kneel down before your father's mother and your aunts." The boys did so immediately.

"Now," said he, "I will show you Lakshman, of

whom you have read so much in the *Rámáyana*. This is he. He is your grandfather's third son." Having so said, he pointed out Lakshman to them. The boys, when they heard the name of Lakshman, scanned him carefully from head to foot, and then bowed low at his feet with the deepest reverence. They had much reason to feel respect for Lakshman on account of his goodness to their unhappy mother.

4. "Now," said Kausalyá to Lakshman, "let me ask you to bring Rám and the venerable Vasishta here, that we may tell them the happy news." When Rám and Vasishta arrived, Kausalyá told them the whole history. The doubts that were still left in the mind of Rám concerning the two lads were now entirely removed. Tears gushed from his eyes, and he held his two sons fondly to his breast.

5. Kausalyá then suggested that the absent wife should be sent for and taken back by her husband and all the members of the royal household. Rám received this proposal with silence, which Kausalyá believed was intended to signify assent. So she begged Válímiki to do all that was needed for the bringing of Sítá. Válímiki at once went to his tent and selected one of his pupils who should go on the journey to his hermitage and fetch the forsaken woman. Kausalyá provided a sedan or *dóli*, in which Sítá might be carried.

XIII. SÍTÁ IS SENT FOR AND IS BROUGHT INTO THE ENCAMPMENT.

1. By degrees it became generally known amongst all who had assembled in the plain of Naimisha, that those two boys, who had recited the *Rámáyana*, were the sons of Rám, to whom Sítá had given birth in Válímiki's hermitage after she had been banished by Rám—that Sítá herself was still alive and was about to be received back in Rám's house,—and that a messenger had been sent to fetch her to Naimisha.

Hearing all this many persons were much pleased, but there were some who said: "Our king is a man who easily changes his mind. If she is to be taken back, why did he ever send her away?"

2. These words reached the ears of Rám, and though he very much desired to take Sítá back, having never questioned her innocence, he now began to hesitate. Perceiving that doubts of her innocence were still felt by some of his subjects, he called for Lakshman and took counsel with him what should be done.

After much discussion, it was settled between the two brothers, that Rám should take her back, if she could prove her innocence publicly before the assembly. Lakshman informed Válímiki of this decision.

3. Válímiki was very much disappointed and vexed when he heard what Lakshman told him. He went at once into Rám's presence and assured him of the fact that Sítá was entirely innocent.

“I have no doubt at all,” said Rám, “of Sítá’s innocence ; but as I have taken upon me the burden of royalty, I am not my own master. In such a matter I must be guided by what my people think, and not by my own belief or disbelief. There is in the minds of the people a strong feeling of doubt concerning Sítá’s innocence. If we cannot remove this doubt, how can I receive her back ? For the sorrows which Sítá has had to bear from my treatment of her, I have long been reaping the bitter fruit, and have lost all happiness in life. Nor have I once thought of taking another wife. What anguish I have suffered my own heart only knows. If I could die immediately, it would be to me a happy release from the sorrows of existence.”

4. With these words Rám burst into a passion of grief. Then, when he had recovered himself, he joined his hands together and said to Válmíki in a beseeching tone : “ I have this request to make to you, O sage. When Sítá arrives in your tent, bring her with you into the assembly, and ask the consent of all to her being taken back. If all are willing that I should take her back, I will receive her at once. If some are not willing, it will be necessary for her to prove her innocence before the assembly by some proof which cannot be contradicted.”

Válmíki agreed, though very unwillingly, to act upon this plan. He returned to his own tent with a sad face and heavy heart. He made up his mind, however, that when the time came for bringing Sítá into the assembly, he would himself strongly maintain her innocence before

them all, and he hoped that the entire assembly would accept his assurance and assent to her being taken back.

5. In the meanwhile the messenger arrived with the sedan or *dólí* at the hermitage where Sítá was living. Hearing from the messenger that she had been summoned by Válmíki to Naimisha and that the sedan had been sent by Kausalyá, the mother of Rám, she felt a thrill of delight pass through her entire frame such as she had not once felt since the day of her banishment. She now said to herself:—

“Since my mother Kausalyá has sent a sedan for me, I may consider it certain that I shall be taken back by her son. I know that his affection for me has continued to be as strong as ever, or he would have taken another wife long ago. I know too that he has suffered as much pain as I have from our separation. Now at last, after our long and patient waiting, our sorrows are coming to an end.”

6. With these thoughts in her mind she prepared to start on the journey and took her seat inside the sedan. Tears of joy fell from her eyes, and she felt already much stronger in body than she had felt for a long time past. There are no bounds to the energy and sense of enjoyment which hope can give: without hope we could ill endure the sorrows and hardships of life. She fancied herself once more in the presence of her beloved, seated on the same cushion with him, each gazing at the other with looks of love, and each relating to the other how painful the long separation had been. All kinds of happy scenes

between herself and the other ránís, old and young, passed through her mind as she was carried along by the dólí-bearers. On the evening of the second day after leaving the hermitage she reached Naimisha and entered Válímíki's tent.

XIV. THE END OF SÍTÁ.

1. When she had taken a little rest in the tent, Válímíki said to her in a tone of voice which expressed the tender feelings of his heart: "Rest here for the night, dear Sítá. To-morrow the king, Rám Chandra, will receive you back. At the proper time he will take his seat in the assembly, and then in the presence of the assembled multitude I will deliver you into his hands."

2. Válímíki had by this time convinced himself that the whole assembly would immediately accept his assurance of Sítá's innocence, and that no one in the assembly would be so hard-hearted or dull-minded as to refuse his assent. So he did not think it necessary to tell her that she might possibly be called upon to give proof of her innocence before the people.

Neither did Kusha or Lava know anything about this. The two boys and the mother sat talking together till it was late, and they told her everything about the recital and how they had been received and embraced by their father, the king. All this made Sítá feel very happy. Now at last, she thought, my troubles are ended, and I shall be received back by my husband. After so many

years of sorrow and despair the prospect of release gave her so much delight that she could not sleep all that night from thinking of it.

3. Next morning, at the hour which had been fixed, Válmiiki entered the assembly, bringing with him Sítá and her two sons, Kusha and Lava. Many hearts were struck with pity at seeing the wasted form of Sítá and the care-worn look in her face. It was indeed a sad sight to those who had known her in former years as the happy and devoted wife against whom no fault had ever been alleged; it was especially painful to Rám and his mother Kausalyá.

4. Válmiiki came forward and said in a loud voice, so that his words might be heard, if possible, by all the thousands who were present :

“ Nobles of Ayódhyá ! citizens and villagers from all parts of Kósala who have come to this gathering ! this lady, whom I have brought here to-day with her two sons, Kusha and Lava, whose recitals you have just heard, is the wife of your king Rám Chandra, who, though he knew her to be innocent, banished her from his house because he had heard that some of his subjects did not believe in her innocence. She has lived in my hermitage ever since her banishment, and I know her to be the purest and best of women. Now I call upon you all to show your full consent to her being taken back by her husband, who has never doubted her innocence and with your consent is quite ready to receive her. There ought not to be the slightest doubt in any one’s mind that Sítá is entirely innocent.”

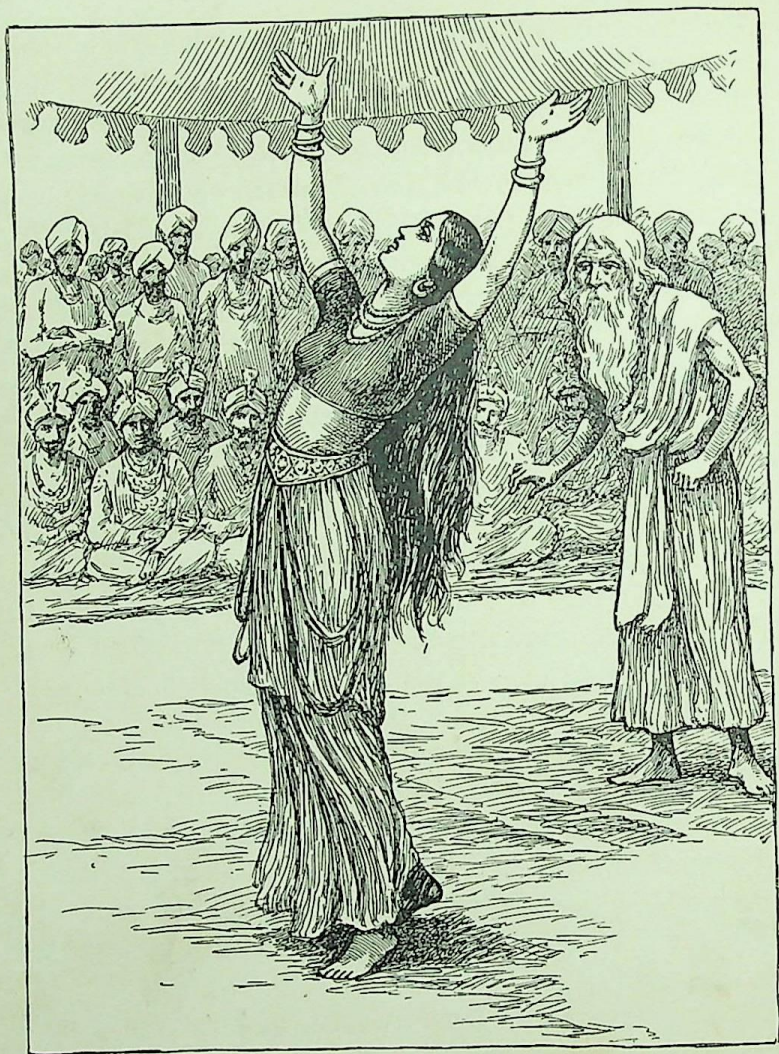
5. As soon as Válímíki had ceased speaking, the nobles stood up, and all with one accord proclaimed, "If Rám will again receive the honourable Sítá in his house, it will give the greatest pleasure to all of us." That announcement, if the people had joined in it, would have been sufficient for Rám; but the people remained silent and fixed their eyes on the ground. It was clear from this that the people did not believe in Sítá's innocence, and were not willing that Sítá should be taken back.

Válímíki was horror-stricken at finding that the people did not give their consent. Having no choice in the matter, he turned to Sítá and said, "Child, that foolish doubt which was in the minds of the people about your innocence has never left them. You must now give some proof of your innocence which will convince the assembly."

6. But Sítá's soul rebelled against being forced to submit to such an unexpected insult. She who had never once failed or faltered in the purity of her love, could not stoop to plead her cause before a mixed assembly of ignorant strangers. With all the strength of voice that still remained to her wasted form she said:

"O Mother Earth, if from the day of my birth I have led a spotless life,—if I have laboured to act my part in purity of devotion and have been a true and faithful wife, spare me the shame of these reproaches and take me unto thyself."

7. Suddenly the ground opened, and there appeared a throne of marvellous beauty, on which Prithiví, the goddess of Earth, was seated. She took Sítá by the hand



and said, "Welcome, my daughter," and placed Sítá by her side. The sinless but dishonoured queen, seated on the throne of Prithiví, slowly descended into the earth, and as she descended a shower of flowers fell upon her head from the bright beings of the upper world.

Among the thousands who witnessed this sight every one was now convinced of the innocence of the ill-used Sítá. But it was too late; she had left the habitations of men for ever.

In the following lines (quoted with the consent of Messrs. Dent and Sons, the publishers, and of the executors of the late Romesh Chandra Dutt, the author) the passing of Sítá is thus described in page 178 of "Rámáyana and Mahá-bhárata," as published in Everyman's Library:

Ráma's queen and Janak's daughter, will she stoop her cause to plead?

Witness of her truth and virtue can a loving woman need?

Oh! her woman's heart is bursting, and her day on earth is done:
Slow she pressed her heaving bosom,—slow and sadly thus begun:

"If unstained in thought and action I have lived from day of birth,
Spare a daughter's shame and anguish, and receive her, Mother Earth!

"If in duty and devotion I have laboured undefiled,
Mother Earth, who bore this woman, once again receive thy child."

Then the earth was rent and parted, and a golden throne arose,
Held aloft by jewelled Nágas, as the leaves enfold the rose.

And the mother in embraces held her spotless, sinless child,
Saintly Janak's saintly daughter, pure and true and undefiled.

Gods and men proclaim her virtue; but fair Sítá is no more.
Lone is Ráma's loveless bosom, and his days of bliss are o'er.

ROMESH CHANDRA DUTT,
The Great Epics of Ancient India.

THE END

